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ABSTRACT

Many countries' reform efforts are government-directed programs that are driven by the government rather than by educators or bureaucrats. A comparative analysis of this type of reform, with a focus on Canada, is presented here. The paper raises questions about the international character of education reform by comparing the Canadian experience with that of several other countries. It examines issues of commonality across jurisdictions, which is followed by another look through a Canadian lens. The text focuses on four aspects of reform: (1) the sources of reforms as initially proposed by governments, the role of various actors and forces in originating reforms, and the assumptions about education and reform; (2) what happened to reforms between their initial proposal and their actual passage into law; (3) the steps taken to implement reforms and the model of implementation that was used; and (4) the available evidence as to the effects of reforms, with particular attention to what may be known about how the reforms have affected student outcomes and learning processes. Subjects covered in the paper include the context of education reform in Canada, commonalities in reform, factors promoting commonality, significant differences, factors promoting differences, Canadian perspectives, and the unique nature of education reform in Canada. (Contains 62 references.) (RJM)

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International Education Reform: A Canadian Perspective

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International Education Reform:

A Canadian Perspective [1]

Abstract

Many countries around the world are engaged in processes of large scale government-mandated reform of education. A number of commentators have remarked on the commonalities across these reform efforts, especially the extent to which reforms in various countries embody a common set of ideas about needed improvements, and linked these issues to the larger phenomenon of globalization.

Our research project studies government-mandated reform in New Zealand, England, two Canadian provinces, and the U S state of Minnesota. In each case we are looking at the origins and sources of reform, the politics of approval, the implementation strategies that are being used, and at available knowledge about the outcomes of reforms. We are using a mix of document analysis, reviews of secondary literature, reanalysis of existing data, discussion with colleagues, and interviewing as our primary research methods.

The examples most often cited in arguing for a global phenomenon of policy borrowing in current educational changes are from England, the US and New Zealand. However Canada, as another largely English-speaking industrialized country, provides some interesting contrasts. Reforms in Canada have had some quite different focuses (such as reducing the number of school districts) and different emphases even within similar issues (such as the treatment of the issue of 'choice'). These differences raise questions, which we explore in this session, of the ways in which we might think about educational reform as an international phenomenon.

International Education Reform:

A Canadian Perspective

The last decade has been characterized in many countries by large-scale reforms of public education systems. The term 'reform' can be used in a variety of ways. For purposes of this paper we use it to mean programs of educational change that are government-directed and initiated based on an overtly political analysis (that is, one driven by the political apparatus of government rather than by educators or bureaucrats), and justified on the basis of the need for a very substantial break from current practice.

A number of commentators have remarked on the commonalities across these reform efforts in several English-speaking industrialized countries. Attention has focused on the extent to which reforms embody a common set of ideas about needed improvements, and on possible links between these issues and the larger phenomenon often described as globalization - generally associated with the increased internationalization of economies, financial structures and the flow of ideas (Davies & Guppy, 1997; Powers & Whitty, 1997). In this paper we raise questions about the international character of education reform by comparing the Canadian experience with that of several other countries. We deal first with issues of commonality across the jurisdictions followed by another look through a Canadian lens, followed by a similar process looking at differences across settings.

The work reported here is part of a multi-year study of education reform in four countries - Canada, the United States, England and New Zealand. In Canada we are focusing on provinces of Alberta and Manitoba - the former an early adopter of substantial changes and the latter having a comparatively modest program of reforms. In the United States we are using Minnesota as our initial site because it was an early adopter of several important reforms. [2]

Our project as a whole sets out to look at four aspects of reform in these settings: 1) Origins. Our focus here is on the sources of reforms as initially proposed by governments, the role of various actors and forces in originating reforms, and the

assumptions about education and reform (explicit or implicit) contained in these proposals.

2) Approval. We are interested in what happened to reforms between their initial proposal and their actual passage into law or regulation in each jurisdiction, in the politics of the reforms, and in the factors that led to any changes between proposals and approval.

3) Implementation. We will be giving attention to the steps taken to implement reforms, the choice of 'policy levers', and the model of implementation, if any, that informed the reform process in each setting.

4) Effects. Our interest here is on the available evidence as to the effects, intended or otherwise, of reforms, with particular attention to what may be known about how the reforms have affected student outcomes and learning processes in schools.

We are also focusing attention on three areas that have been important in many reform efforts: 1) centralization of curriculum coupled with large-scale testing of students and evaluation of schools; 2) decentralization of management responsibility from intermediate bodies to individual schools, and 3) introducing elements of a market system to education (such as school choice or charter schools). Other aspects of reform that have been important in some settings, such as changes in teacher training and development, are not taken up here.

Data sources for the study include analysis of original documents (such as legislative debates, government policy documents, legislation, and position papers of non-governmental organizations), secondary analysis and scholarly literature, interviews with key respondents in some of the jurisdictions, and interaction with academic colleagues in the various countries involved.[3] To this point we have relied more extensively on primary sources in Manitoba and Alberta, and more on secondary sources in the other three jurisdictions.

Contexts

We will not attempt to describe the social and political context of education in Britain, New Zealand or the United States. These are vitally important, but any remotely adequate effort to do so would make this paper much too long. We will, however, say something about the context for education reform in Canada partly because this is more central to the paper and partly because it is generally less well known.

Public school education in Canada, with the significant exception of the education of First Nations[4] students, is a constitutional responsibility of the ten provinces which they guard carefully. There is no federal office or department of education; the federal government does have various important involvements in education, but these are spread among many government ministries, usually without a direct link to what occurs in schools. The Council of Ministers of Education (CMEC) is a creation of the provincial governments that does play a coordinating role but has no powers over any of the provinces. Because the country is so large with such a small population, because six of the ten provinces have populations of a million or less, and because of the pervasive influence of the United States on almost every aspect of Canadian life, Canadian educators and policy-makers may be more knowledgeable about developments in the U S than about developments in neighbouring provinces. Curriculum, assessment and other key policy controls have been provincial, though in recent years there have been some attempts to create regional or pan-Canadian curricula and testing programs.

Canadian education has been shaped by language and religion as well as geography and ethnicity. Canada is a country of 30 million people. It is officially a bilingual country (English and French) with a multicultural population. The distinct status of Canada's approximately one million Aboriginal people is slowly being recognized in this official description (Canada, 1997). About one quarter of the population, largely though by no means entirely in the province of Quebec, has French as a mother tongue. There is a sizeable Anglophone minority in Quebec, just as there are Francophone minorities in other

parts of the country. At the same time, Canada has a large population, living in all parts of the country, with other mother tongues and cultural backgrounds.

The most heated issues in the history of Canadian education have almost always been around language and religion. In the last few years we have had enormous public debate over attempts in Quebec to move from a system of school districts based on religion to a system based on language, over the attempt in Newfoundland, a province with fewer than 120,000 students, to move to a single public system from the five denominational systems that were in place, over the process for recognizing the constitutional right of Francophone parents to manage their own schools in mainly-Anglophone provinces such as Manitoba and Ontario, or over attempts in Alberta to reduce the number of Catholic school boards. All of these have led to constitutional court cases as well as to heated political argument. Furthermore, Canadians are still trying to sort out the impact of schools that for many years denied Aboriginal people any opportunity to control their own education or to learn about or practice their languages, cultures, and religions.

The original Confederation of four provinces - Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario and Quebec) that led to the creation of Canada involved delicate compromises around the place of Quebec in a majority Anglophone country, and guarantees of religious freedom in schooling for Christian but not other religious minorities. These have taken on different forms in various parts of the country. All provinces have a public school system, but five provinces also maintain a publicly-funded system of minority religious schools (Protestant in Quebec; chiefly Catholic elsewhere). Many provinces also provide some level of public financial support for private or independent schools, which may have a religious, ethnic or other focus. In addition, First Nations are each responsible for education on their own lands (formerly reservations). So in many Canadian provinces there are effectively four school systems receiving significant public funds, making the boundaries between state or public schools and private or independent schools complex and often blurred (Shapiro, 1985).

Commonalities in reform

Quite a few commentators have remarked on the degree to which the various countries in this study have been doing something that is essentially the same. For example, Lawton (1992) presents rationales for reform that are held to apply across countries and Guthrie (1996) describes common reform elements across many countries. Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe (1995) also note the extent to which policies advocating greater use of markets have been adopted, albeit in varying forms, in many countries, and a comparative literature has developed looking at reforms such as school choice and decentralization (e.g. Carter & O'Neil, 1995; Davies & Guppy, 1997; Lingard, Knight & Porter, 1993; Whitty, 1997).

All discussion of education reform occurs within a perceived context of powerful social change. The most important of these include the widespread belief in increasing international economic competition, powerful effects of new technologies, and fiscal restraint in many states together with reduced belief in the efficacy of government intervention leading to efforts to reduce sharply state policy influence as well as public expenditures.

Quite frequently these common elements are attributed to a growth in the world-wide influence of the political right, described as the New Right, neo-liberalism, or neo-conservatism. For example, Willis in writing about assessment in New Zealand, claims that "To a large extent the direction of reform in countries such as Britain, NZ and the USA has been influenced by the ideologies of the new right which have linked educational performance to economic growth." (1992, p 205).

Some analysts also connect these changes to the broader phenomenon of globalization (e.g. Power & Whitty, 1997; Lingard & Rizvi, in press), though this term is used to refer to such disparate phenomena as the increasing impact of international organizations, the increasing movement of ideas across political jurisdictions, or, more

often, changing economic production and finance structures that are seen to have diminished the power of the nation state.

An examination of political rhetoric as well as actual policy certainly does indicate some commonalities across jurisdictions. Features that are frequently found in the official rhetoric of governments (and, importantly, their non-governmental allies such as think tanks and citizens' groups) in these settings concern the nature of the problem, its causes, and promising solutions. On the nature of problems one can identify the suggestion that too much money has been spent to too little effect, that there is a crisis in schooling around weak outcomes of students, and that economic prosperity is threatened by poor school results. In regard to causes, blame is often attributed to teachers using so-called 'progressive' teaching methods and to the dominant influence of professional groups such as unions and universities in the education system. Solutions typically involve more parent influence, stricter standards for students, tighter accountability through more testing, and a belief in some version of a market influence on the provision of schooling.

Factors promoting commonality

A number of factors promote the kind of commonality just described. It does seem that ideas move more frequently and more easily across borders than might once have been the case - a concept described as 'policy borrowing'. How such learning takes place is a largely unexplored question (although there is a growing literature in this field, such as Finegold, McFarland and Richardson, 1993; Rose, 1993; and Halpin and Troyna, 1995), but several vehicles seem likely contributors. [5]

We might think of ideas as being able to move in several different ways - through personal contact as well as through electronic and print transmission. Clearly all of these have become increasingly international in recent years. Those involved in generating policy alternatives - academics, staff of think tanks, civil servants and politicians - travel more and see more of what others are doing - through, for example, trade missions,

conferences, involvement in international organizations, and such events as the World Economic Summit in Davos, Switzerland. International organizations such as the OECD also play a role in this regard (Lingard & Rizvi, in press), though on the whole it appears that research and policy learning have not been especially important (Levin, in press).

It is possible to document the movement of key promoters of education reform ideas across the world. Links exist between political parties - for example between the staff of British Prime Minister Tony Blair and US President Bill Clinton, or between the Thatcher and Reagan/Bush administrations (Whitty & Edwards, 1992). New Zealand's Roger Douglas, architect of many neo-conservative changes there, was often in Canada as a consultant to or guest of Conservative governments interested in similar policies, and Britain's ministers have travelled to many countries promoting their brand of education reform. Kenneth Baker was influenced by a visit to the U S in 1987 to look at magnet schools, Chubb and Moe (1992) wrote a book about the implications of British reform for the US, Stuart Sexton went from England to New Zealand to write a report on reform (see McCullough, 1991), and so on.

Print vehicles, too, are more and more international as newspapers are distributed world-wide, journals become international, and publishing houses are increasingly part of multi-national companies. The electronic media move easily across boundaries and borrow stories from each other. The rise of all-news TV stations has resulted in more exchange of programs across countries.

People do use these international sources, too - witness the extent to which a piece in The Economist or The New York Times is likely to be read and cited in many countries and several continents. Use of international media is also likely to be greater among policy influentials.

Finally, the rapidly expanding use of the Internet and the World Wide Web has made international contact much more feasible. One can learn about education policy in

many parts of the world simply through one's computer. (In fact, much of the research for this study is being done on the Web.)

Significant differences

Although these commonalities do exist and are important, it would be misleading to see international education reform as being uniform across the world. Those who have looked more carefully across jurisdictions have generally concluded that differences among countries are at least as important as the similarities (e.g. Hirsh, 1997; Whitty, 1997). Gewirttz, Ball and Bowe point out (1995, p 4) that although the invocation of market solutions is in some ways a global phenomenon, there is considerable difference in "how governments have used the market form. This applies both [sic] to the extent of the use of the market form, the purposes it is intended to serve and the precise market mechanisms that governments put into place via legislation." Davies and Guppy (1997, p. 449) conclude that "what is most remarkable about the United Kingdom's curricular redesign and school choice... is its uniqueness."

Looking beyond the English-speaking industrialized countries also changes the picture considerably. An OECD report on education reform and evaluation, for examples, stressed the degree to which continental European countries were far less drawn to reforms based on stricter assessment and accountability regimes (Kallen, 1996). These differences are particularly interesting because they serve to undermine any suggestion that current reforms are inevitable in the face of the forces of globalization and instead emphasize the ways in which language and culture mediate the flow of ideas across national boundaries and, in Canada's case, within those boundaries as well.

Looking at federal states also points out the variability in reform across settings. For example, charter schools, seen as a highly popular reform in the United States, have still been enacted into law in only half the states (Mintrom & Vergari, 1997). Cibulka (1991) shows clearly how assessment reforms took on very different characters in three US

states. In Canada, many provinces have recently reduced the number of school districts, but several provinces, including at least two with many small districts, have not moved in that direction

Finally, we note that rhetoric is one thing, policy is another, and practice may be quite another again. Similar talk about reform may produce policies that are quite different, and policies that look similar may turn out to be very different 'on the ground' (Levin, 1997; in press). It is important not to jump to the conclusion that rhetoric will always lead to effective action. Indeed, as Power (1992) has pointed out, many of the critics of current reforms lament the efficacy of these changes even as the lamented the lack of efficacy of policies they earlier advocated ,such as comprehensive schooling.

Factors promoting difference

Reform programs take on a different cast in each jurisdiction because of differences in political and educational culture across jurisdictions. Whatever the commonalities induced by the various factors just described, local history and practice remain powerful shapers of people's thinking and action. For example, as Whitty and Power (1997) point out, the influence of the grammar school tradition on the shape of education reform and provision in England has been pervasive. In the United States the strong tradition of local control of education coupled with states rights has made it very difficult to achieve anything like a national approach to educational issues. Another important example is the impact of the non-parliamentary system in the United States. The separation of executive and legislative control creates dramatic differences in political practice - for example in the ability of an executive to implement its program. One can only conjecture about the fate of, say, Thatcherite reforms had the Conservative Party in England not had a parliamentary majority. In the U S system there is almost inevitably more compromising and making of deals in any legislative program than a majority parliamentary government would face.

These differences in history and culture are, of course, anchored in the differing geographic and demographic situation in each country. Thus Scotland, though nominally part of the British system, continues to have quite different education policies for various historical reasons (Raab et al., 1997). In New Zealand the Maori presence has brought a greater emphasis on equity than might otherwise have been the case. Issues of race and ethnicity continue to play a dominant role in the interpretation of many reform efforts - for example the debate over choice - in the United States. A large and dispersed country such as the US faces quite different prospects in implementing reforms than does a small national state such as New Zealand, while in Britain, as Glatter, Woods and Bagley (1997) note, the impact of decentralization and choice depends very much on the geography, demography and history of school provision in particular local areas. Policy by definition tends to have a broad sweep, but practice occurs in concrete and particular settings.

Yet another feature that creates difference across settings concerns what might be called the accidental - who happens to be in power at a particular time, what else happens to be on the agenda, where a government might be in its mandate and what its other political problems are, and so on. Daugherty (1997) contends that the nature of assessment in Britain was changed in important ways because Kenneth Baker, the Secretary of State at the time, was willing to adopt a particular set of recommendations that supported criterion referenced testing and continued to give an important role to teachers. The consensus of New Zealand commentators is that the reforms of the late 1980s were shaped directly because the Labour government had just won a fourth term, and because the Prime Minister, David Lange, had taken a strong personal interest in education (Brown, 1988). Boston et al (1996, p. 16), looking at the entire set of social policy reforms in New Zealand, ascribes them to "a unique convergence of economic pressures and political opportunities". The case studies of change in Minnesota (Mazzoni, 1993; Roberts & King, 1996) note the pivotal role played by the Governor, Rudy Perpich, but also by certain key allies in the legislature as well as some very important external lobbyists.

Canadian perspectives

Canadian education policy also exhibits a considerable amount of commonality in the rhetoric and practice of reform across provinces. Education rhetoric stresses the importance of education for economic growth and the need for higher standards and stricter accountability measures. Policy measures often seem to move across provinces. All provinces, for example, have passed legislation creating parent advisory councils for schools. However there are almost always some variations as well. For example, many provinces, but not all, have reduced the number of school districts. The eastern province of New Brunswick abolished its districts entirely but the prairie provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan have not legislated fewer school districts.[6] All provinces have tightened requirements for core curricula through such measures as restricted choice in high schools and greater time allocations for key subjects in elementary schools, and all have also stepped up the amount of provincial testing of students, but the extent of testing, the ways in which results are reported, and other features of the testing program vary considerably across provinces. Several provinces have introduced some version of student/parent choice of schools, but most have not.

In comparison to the other countries in our study we find less emphasis in Canada on market solutions to education problems - perhaps because the Canadian system already contains a fair amount of diversity of provision (Riffel, Levin & Young, 1996). Only one province, Alberta, has introduced charter schools, and then only in very limited numbers. The debate over reform in Canada, whether one looks at government white papers or parliamentary debates on contentious pieces of legislation, has also, as we have pointed out elsewhere (Levin & Young, 1997), been less overtly ideological than in countries such as Britain or New Zealand.

In general, Canada has seen less dramatic change in education policy than we have found in the other settings we are studying. Canadian provinces have had neither the purposeful programs of change seen in Britain and New Zealand nor the same frequent and

dramatic changes in direction that characterizes many states in the U S. Even where all provinces have moved - for example to legislate local school councils involving parents - they have done so in a relatively limited fashion since in no province do these councils have anything other than an advisory role (in contrast to the very substantial authority given to governing bodies in England and New Zealand).

In fact, the emphasis in Canada has been less on restructuring the system than on reducing public spending on education as part of general efforts to cut government spending levels. All provinces have restricted funding to public education and in many provinces the decline has not just been in real terms but in current dollars as well. Reductions in funding have been accompanied in most provinces by some combination of unilateral rollbacks in teacher salaries, unilateral legislative changes to collective bargaining arrangements, and reductions in overall staffing levels. Governments and others have, however, often used arguments about educational improvement to justify funding reductions thus contributing to a more polarized debate. In Britain or New Zealand, even though funding to schools has been reduced, debate has largely been about such matters as governance and assessment. In Canada, as we mentioned, contentious issues continue to centre to a far greater degree than in other countries around language, religion and ethnicity.

Explaining the Canadian situation

The unique nature of education reform in Canada sheds some additional light on the sets of factors discussed earlier as contributing to commonality and difference in other states. A number of key constraints were mentioned in the initial discussion of the Canadian context. These include the particularly weak role of the national government in education, and the historic - and still continuing - preoccupation in Canadian education policy with issues of language and religion (Levin, 1993; Manzer, 1994).

Several other elements also deserve mention. The national bodies or networks that might foster commonality in education policy are quite weak in Canada. The Council of Ministers of Education is a small organization that works only where consensus exists among a dozen or so ministers who may have very different political orientations. However CMEC certainly has expanded its role in recent years and has, for the first time, undertaken work of real national impact, in the area of organizing common student assessment. Provincial education ministries in many provinces have very small analytical or policy staffs and links among ministries have historically been weak. Other national organizations, such as those of school boards or teachers, are often not very strong partly because there is no federal presence to be lobbied, partly because Canada has a small population spread over a large area and partly because these organizations are often split on linguistic lines so that a quarter or so of the population - Quebec - may not participate. Even business groups, though they are, as in the U S, influential, have not had the national impact that has been the case either in England or the U S. Canada also has relatively weak national media - again in part because of a diverse population in a large area and partly because of the dominance of U S media.

A final important point is that the level of public satisfaction with education is relatively high in Canada (Livingstone, 1995), which may make large reforms more difficult politically. However some of the other settings also appear to have had reasonably high levels of satisfaction, though this in itself is no guarantee that a determined government will not press ahead with changes.

Conclusion

The simultaneous but also contradictory tendencies towards globalization and local influence have been noted before. Societies are being pulled in contrary directions - on one hand towards uniformity but on the other towards a deeper recognition of their own

particular natures. The outcome of this struggle is not given, and may vary from issue to issue and time to time. In this same paradoxical vein, speaking of education reform as an international phenomenon is both helpful and misleading. It is clear that ideas about education reform are being borrowed in some sense by different countries, whether one sees this as a case of learning or a case of relatively thoughtless adoption more akin to 'infection' (Levin, in press). Under these circumstances looking at the ways in which ideas move and mutate and at the factors that promote an international approach to education policy can help all of us learn about the ways that our own settings are being shaped by forces that were once considered relatively unimportant.

We would argue, however, that there is also a danger of overestimating the extent to which we are inevitably subject to international patterns or trends. Much necessarily remains local, and the impact of global trends may in fact increase certain local capacities for action - for example by giving people more alternatives to think about or linking them to others with similar interests whom they would in a previous time never encountered. Giddens (1994) has argued that the postmodern world forces us to invent and define ourselves in a way that people did not have to do in earlier eras. This requirement can be seen as both an imposition - in that we must now do something we did not used to need - and an opportunity - in that we can now shape aspects of our own destiny that used to be controlled. The same may be true of policy in education. What we make of ideas and events is often as important as the ideas or events themselves.

Notes

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2. Differences in the constitutional structure of states are an important issue largely unexamined here. New Zealand is a unitary state; Britain is largely unitary, but Scotland has important differences from England and Wales. The United States is federal, but with the federal government playing an important role in education and with many local districts more important than state governments in some states. Canada is a federal state in which provinces are very powerful educationally but the federal government has only a minor role. Much more could be said about the importance of these differences.

3. We note here two features of the project that we regard as innovative: 1) extensive use of the World Wide Web as a source of data (for example Hansards of various jurisdictions are available on the Web, as are many government policy documents), and 2) an ongoing dialogue with colleagues in the various jurisdictions, being carried on largely by e-mail, in which we compare our ideas, findings and data sources with those expert in each setting.

4. The terminology related to Canada's Aboriginal population is complex as this group includes Indians, Inuit and Metis people with and without some official status as being Aboriginal. For political identification the term "First Nations" is preferred by many Aboriginal people in Canada to refer to the various governments of Aboriginal people.

5. Policy borrowing is not a new phenomenon, of course, either in Canada or elsewhere.

Canadian school systems were originally modelled on those of the European countries that colonized Canada and more recently on many attributes of the U S system.

6. In 1993 the Manitoba government commissioned a review of school district boundaries. The report of the Commission (Manitoba, 1994) recommended a reduction from 57 to 21 districts. However after considering the report the government decided not to mandate any changes.

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